

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY



[BY ALLESSANDRA CAIRO]

Faculty, staff, and administrators are all burdened by the lack of time, budgetary constraints, and ever-changing priorities, and facilities staff are no different. With all these constraints, how can real change happen? Student engagement can make facilities work easier and more fulfilling. To benefit from student engagement, utilize some of the following proven strategies and examples. Involving students from the ground up on projects not only gives them hands-on experiences and better prepares them for the real world after graduating, but, if implemented well, can also lessen the burden on staff time and budgets.

There are many common negative assumptions regarding student involvement, such as: students lack the ability to follow through; they do not have the skills, experience, and knowledge necessary to make a significant difference; or they are only interested in what they see as important, not in what actually needs to be accomplished. In addition, a common viewpoint is that it takes more time for facilities staff to work with students than if they were to do it themselves or hire an outside vendor. Also, administration and faculty do not identify facilities departments as a potential educational outlet.

However, there are plenty of examples within an emerging trend toward students working with facilities that prove these negative assumptions and viewpoints are most often misconceptions. There are a number of ways to benefit from student work. Julian Keniry, senior director for campus and community leadership at the National Wildlife Federation, identifies a few. One solution is to bring faculty in as stakeholders to facilitate projects and share in the risk. Another good strategy is to have student work tied to academic success or other similar incentives. Providing internships for students in which they can receive hands-on experience and build and improve their skill set benefits the students and the facilities staff. Students can often push for energy efficiency and sustainability related projects that facilities staff might want but can't advocate for due to internal politics. Once accomplished, the reputation of the facilities area can benefit from lower utility bills and/or lower pollution.

College Student Educators International (<http://www.myacpa.org/task-force/sustainability/>) has an extensive website on the ways student affairs staff can work with students on campus on co-curricular sustainability activities. Student affairs or sustainability coordinators can often be effective facilitators when connecting facilities with students. Faculty and sustainability coordinators can provide skills training to make the students more valuable to facilities departments. While not exhaustive, these approaches provide a good



starting point for student engagement. By institutionalizing some of the aforementioned concepts and resources, positive change towards a greener campus is inevitable. The projects can often be fun and revitalizing for facilities staff as well.

It is important to note that there are plenty of students who need little more than support and encouragement. Passionate students are willing to work extremely hard to make change, and many times all it requires is an outlet to do so. Take Illinois State University, for example.

Illinois State University (ISU) has done an exemplary job of engaging its students to work effectively with their facilities staff to assist in greening their campus. Mike O'Grady, director of grounds and fleet services at ISU, along with his team, has worked collaboratively with not only students, but faculty and staff from several departments to create a greener, more sustainable campus and to promote sustainability initiatives such as campus recycling and composting.

When two students of an environmental studies course approached staff with a thorough proposal to create an herb garden on ISU's main campus, O'Grady and others were ready to assist. The mission of the herb garden, as explained by the students, is "to educate students, faculty, and staff on sustainable agriculture by provid-

ing student volunteer grown produce to the Illinois State Campus Dining Services. As well as being aesthetically pleasing, it will promote interdisciplinary cooperation between student environmental organizations and encourage healthier food choice practices."

O'Grady and his grounds crew immediately stepped to the plate to assist with the students' project. While the students recruited volunteers, O'Grady identified land on ISU's main campus that encompassed favorable growing conditions, but was also visible and would allow for campus-wide interaction. Working closely together, O'Grady and the students created a schedule to determine when the land should be cleared, the mulch and compost brought in, the seeds planted and harvested, and when the soil should be turned over for the next season. With budgets tight, O'Grady managed to finance the project through his own department's budget and scheduled staff time to clear and plow the land, provided tools and water, and purchased seeds and mushroom compost.

After a successful first year that produced a new collaboration between students and facilities, an aesthetically pleasing view on campus and locally produced herbs available in the dining hall, the student group has already begun plans for expanding the herb garden this year.

This is just one example of many. When participants in the Green Schools Listserv were asked for examples of positive interactions between facilities staff and students, there were dozens of replies within the first day. The Energy Action Coalition, comprising 50 national youth organizations focusing on making campuses less polluting and more sustainable, have hundreds of stories of students working with facilities departments. Students and facilities staff are working together all over the country, overcoming barriers and challenges one step at a time. In many cases, facilities staff do act as informal “latent professors,” adding to the student’s education and practical skill set.

Another example is at **Oberlin College** in Ohio. Keith Watkins, director of facilities, is working with administration and the admissions office to be included in first-year student orientation. Watkins believes by providing new students with information up front about the sustainability initiatives occurring on campus, the recycling efforts and other available opportunities for students to get involved, the already successful programs will become even more successful and new programs will begin. He has found that engaging students early on, and allowing them to follow their passion while providing them with guidance, support, and the necessary resources, inevitably creates positive change.

The student resource conservation team at Oberlin (originally a group of two, now a group of 14), along with several other environmentally focused student groups have made major improvements on campus, including the Big Swap, an end-of-the-year collection drive and exchange, a massive composting program, a student garden where the crops

Proven success at Oberlin is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up approach, it is a collaborative effort between students and staff, both working to make a better campus. Several years ago Oberlin’s housing facilities experienced some unwanted pests. Bats were getting inside several residence halls. With the obvious complaint from students, Oberlin staff called in a pest control company to rid them of the problem. After several attempts and strain on the budget, Watkins believed that there had to be a more cost-effective and sustainable solution to the problem. After bringing the issue to his students, his students did research to determine that building bat houses near the most highly infested dorms could solve the problem. This solution would save the college money by not having to call pest control and keep a balanced ecosystem in check. Today, if you visit Oberlin you will see two bat houses and residence halls filled only with students.

Several colleges have implemented intern and mentorship programs, or offered hands-on experience in exchange for academic credit, facilitating engagement between students, faculty, and facility staff, as well as other departmental staff. In addition, through these programs and involving multiple departments and faculty, sustainability concepts are being institutionalized at two- and four-year campuses.

At **Kankakee Community College** in Illinois, Rich Soderquist, director of facility and campus security, mentors a student as part of the college’s scholarship based leadership development program. Through this program, the student is required to work a predetermined amount of hours in each semester to obtain hands-on experience in the field. This particular mentorship focuses on construction and design.

Joining the design team and Kankakee staff in design meetings for the new advanced technology center, the student participated in the question and answer portion of the meeting and reviewed blueprints and drafts. Through this, the student was able to gain experience in the design process. The student also participated in meetings for the construction of Kankakee’s new wind turbine schedule to be built in 2011. Again, gaining real-world experience, the student was able to take part in the pre-construction conference and construction meetings throughout the planning process. As the wind turbine is installed, the student will be observing the work and documenting the progress.

When asked about the program, Soderquist said, “It has been a great experience to give back to students and the community.”

Christian Rusby, sustainability coordinator at **North Seattle Community College** (NSCC) in Washington, explains how he overcame the challenge of students not having the necessary skills to do meaningful work. In an interview with Rusby, he acknowledges that facilities staff are unable to invest a sufficient amount of time in training new students, especially with the changing enrollment numbers of community colleges. However, he has found that facilities staff are willing and



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are sold to Campus Dining Services, and the SEED House, an international community of Oberlin students practicing environmentally conscious lifestyles. These changes are benefitting the college not only now, but will continue to benefit the college in the long term. In fact, this is one of the few requirements the student group has. They can choose to work on projects from a laundry list provided to them at the beginning of the year or they can choose a project they themselves create. Either way, they have to choose one project that will provide the campus with positive, long-term effects.



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able to invest their time in him, thus allowing for Rusby to identify small pieces of larger projects in which a student's skill set is a match. By Rusby acting as the facilitator, or "people manager" as Rusby refers to it, facilities staff are able to continue their work with the added benefit of using skilled student workers as Rusby sees fit.

For example, when NSCC decided to complete an inventory of their campus to create a sustainable landscape management plan, Rusby sat with students to identify the skills they had and how they would be able to assist in the large-scale project. Students from several disciplines participated in this large-scale inventory, which to date is approximately 50 percent complete. In spring 2010 two students from a technical writing class were recruited to create a "how to" guide for inventorying trees. One student had a strong background in tree identification, and the other had strong graphic skills. Working together, the students created a 30-page guide that included steps for identifying trees and the most common trees on campus. As the inventory began and data was collected, students from the business program at NSCC analyzed the data and input the information into GIS.

While this is only a brief overview of the project, it is a great example of students working with faculty and staff, from multiple disciplines, toward a sustainable campus.

At Pennsylvania's **Ursinus College**, students of the environmental studies program are required to be active on campus working with faculty, staff, and administration on sustainability projects. When Ursinus College was developing several buildings a few years back, state law allowed for a temporary storm water basin to be created. Upon completion of development, Erony Whyte, a student from an ecosystem management class, looked at the temporary design and developed a proposal for a creative storm water management system. The proposal was presented to administration and president, both of whom were quite impressed with the introductory proposal. Whyte was asked to further develop the proposal over the summer through the college's fellowship program.

Whyte, interning with a local engineering firm and working with faculty, created a formal plan to create a wetland on campus that would act as a natural storm management system. The project evolved to a senior thesis where Whyte created the official blueprints and developed the management and economic plans. The final plans were approved by administration and the board of trustees during Whyte's senior year. Construction commenced the next year and the college now has a self-supporting ecosystem and storm management system.

It is obvious from these stories and others that were not included due to space constraints, students are being empowered to make a difference at two- and four-year colleges and universities alike. The successes above are just a few of the many ingenious ways students are working with facilities staff, administration, and others on their campuses to create sustainable campuses. With a new level of engagement emerging, the benefits of building good working relationships between students and facilities staff will continue to grow. ☺

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